

## **THE ALTAR, THE TENT AND THE WELL**

***A Graduation Address for Davuilevu Theological College given by Rev. Dr. I.S.Tuwere on Tuesday 24<sup>th</sup> November 2009, 2 pm at Baker Memorial Hall, Davuilevu, Nausori.***

*“The Lord appeared to him the same night and said: “I am the God of Abraham your father; fear not for I am with you and I will bless you and multiply your descendants for my servant Abraham’s sake”. So he built an altar there and called upon the name of the Lord, and pitched his tent there. And there Isaac’s servants dug a well” (Genesis 26: 24-25 R.S.V.).*

### ***Introduction***

Between the mid sixties and seventies, drastic changes occurred in many rural areas in Fiji including my home district of Wailevu, in Cakaudrove. Among the forces and factors that contributed to these changes was the construction of the trans-insular road that link up the small town of Savusavu on the South West side of the island and Labasa, up in the north. A good number of men, young and old left their villages and gardens and joined the Public Works Department ([PWD] in the construction of this road. Big machines were brought in to cut down trees and hills to make way for new roads and bridges. The new road was made to run through some villages. Old roads for walking from one village to the next had to be abandoned. Distances between towns and the villages were considerably reduced. Also contacts between coastal villages and villages inland became less frequent because the new main road was now a great attraction.

The sight of the village and its surroundings after all this was quite remarkable. Trees that were there during my boyhood days were no longer there. They had gone, put down by the big machines of the PWD. Hills from which we used to gather firewood in our younger days had been reduced to flatland. Rocks we used to climb had been thrown to other places.

Singing brooks in which we had our first experience of fishing had been buried by the big machines. And some people spent more time during the week in the markets in town than in the village. The sea-route from the village to the town in Savusavu was no longer in use. In many ways, the familiar landmarks had disappeared. We call this change and for me it was change indeed in unsuspected ways. In short, it was no longer the same small village I could still remember. It had changed in

many ways. And this trend of change continues on unhindered at all levels of our common life together in the physical, political, socio-economic and religious levels.

There are three faces of development that can be seen in the Pacific today according to a local social critic and observer<sup>1</sup>

1. The socio-economic changes that are transforming our Pacific communal societies and villages into individualistic ones inextricably drawn into the network of the capitalist world.
2. The evolution of our cultures into new forms with the introduction of new beliefs, new ideas and new value systems.
3. And the growing militarization of our region with accompanying subtle political domination by those who wield the military power.

This is our common experience we all share in the Pacific today. Familiar landmarks have now disappeared. The reputed social critic, Alvin Toffler in his book, *Power Shift* makes the same observation when he says that there are three forces or power-structures that are running the world today: **Knowledge, Wealth** and **Violence**. Knowledge is best shown by the awesome Information Technology that we now have. And knowledge is “Power”. Those who have Wealth have power to dictate and influence. Violence finds expression in the use of guns and arms of different sorts. Violence is a new world-power today and can be carried out either explicitly or implicitly.

The story in Genesis 26 about Isaac is the story of movement. And they share the same story with Abraham his father and Jacob his son. A journey from one place to another. In each place they had to face new situations and meet new people. In comparison with the towering Abraham his father, the complex Jacob his son, the Isaac of the OT seems rather weak in character as well as the way he projects himself. In many ways, Isaac was a very practical sort of person. The most notable point about his life was his ready dependence on and obedience to his father Abraham on their journey to Mount Moriah. His readiness to be sacrificed is a deeply touching story and a significant forerunner to the perfect sacrifice of Jesus at Golgotha.

In this movement from one place to another, Isaac depended on three things: **the altar, the tent and the well**. His life and the life of his household in this continuing exodus revolved around these three

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<sup>1</sup> Suliana Siwatibau in a Graduation Address at the Pacific Theological College.

things. For him, change and the disappearance of familiar landmarks was a fact of life. It was always part of his journey but he never gave up. Like St. Paul in the NT, Isaac would also say:

*“Yet we who have this spiritual treasure are like common clay pots, in order to show that the supreme power belongs to God, not to us. We are often troubled, but not crushed; sometimes in doubt, but never in despair; there are many enemies but we are not destroyed. At all times we carry in our mortal bodies the death of Jesus, so that his life also may be seen in our bodies. Throughout our lives we are always in danger of death for Jesus’ sake in order that his life may be seen in this mortal body of ours. This means that death is at work in us, but life is at work in you.” (II Cor 4:7-12).*

When the going got tough, Isaac kept going. The voice of the Lord which echoed to him that night in Beersheba was always before him:

*“I am the God of Abraham your father, fear not for I am with you.....”*

Graduating students, when the going gets tough for you in the coming years, may you find strength and joy in those words.

## **THE ALTAR**

The altar must be one where the name of the Lord is invoked. Not any names or any other name whether that be in terms of culture or customs or wealth or any high ranking figure. It must be first and foremost the name of the Lord God and Jesus Christ His only Son our Lord. All other matters come under that. So the basic question in our ministry is not whether the Church is modern, relevant or interesting. It is not whether a local Congregation has 20 or 30 or 100 local preachers or none at all or whether it has a magnificent choir or has a lot of money in the bank. No. The basic question is whether or not the Lord God is invoked at the heart and centre of our Christian living. The basic question is how the Crucified Christ is Lord, as the leader of life and of freedom and consequently how Christians follow him and hope in him and in him alone. The late Bishop Leslie Newbigin in an address to the General Assembly of the United Reformed Church in England some years back had this to say:

*"I do not find anywhere in the NT any trace of anxiety about whether the Church is large or small, successful or unsuccessful, popular or unpopular. I find only anxiety about whether this or that community of believers is living in faithfulness to the gospel or not."*

We are called to be faithful Christians. We are not called to be successful. You can be successful in your ministry but that does not necessarily mean you are also faithful. To be faithful is first to allow God to rule our lives, to be its Lord. The God who is not an idea, a general principle, an axiom, a basic attitude but a person revealed to us in the face of Jesus Christ. Because of this, our personal relationship with him is crucial and important. You can get all the degrees you want in your academic pursuit and be successful. But if you are not faithful to your work, or if you go from one work or engagement to another with no commitment and sacrifice, you are empty. You are finished. You become high powered and get easily uninvolved in the common things of life.

At the altar of our Lord, we are called to be his faithful servants. Faithful to him and faithful to his people. The ringing note in the Bible from the OT to the New is the call for God's people to be faithful because God is ever faithful. As you go out from here into the ministry of your Church or coming back here next year for further studies, may you be found faithful.

*Be strong in your prayers*

*Love your people*

*Build them up in faith and love.*

## **THE TENT**

The word itself appears 136 times in the OT and that is quite something for just one word. It goes to say that for Isaac as for the whole of Israel, the tent is not simply another word or vocabulary in the journey of faith. It stands for something quite crucial and important in life. It is closely related to the concept of exodus – *ex...odos* - to move out and be on the way:

*Out of slavery*

*Out of darkness*

*Out of oppression*

And set on a new way, a new journey, a new life, a journey with God. At certain points in his journey, it is God who is saying to Isaac:

*'Get ready; let us go into a new  
Country, a country I will show  
You. Where freedom is enjoyed and  
Where justice rules the whole land  
Come out and let us be on our way.'*

The tent is not just another word. It stands for a way of life; a style of life shared by those who are called God's people. The church of Jesus Christ is a tent-community. As a tent-community, it is always an open Church, - open to God, open to all people and open to the future, the future which always is in God. It does not settle down but always on a journey. Because of this, it is important to travel light. Do not carry too much on the journey. When sending them out on their mission, Jesus says to his disciples:

*"Take nothing on your journey except a staff. No bread, no bag, no money" (Mark6:8)*

Here, it is absolutely necessary for the church to have a good and proper order of its priorities and be critically selective in this list of priorities. This is most important in Fiji here and now. Priorities should be ordered and set in motion in the direction of the mission of the Church in any given situation. We cannot and should never try to do everything all at once. And there is a very real danger in trying to be everything to everyone. We can never please everyone. Mark Twain is absolutely right when he said:

*"I know no the recipe for success. But I know the recipe for failure and that is to try to please everybody."*

The symbol of the tent does not point us in that direction. God forbid. As a tent-community the Church gets its direction and dynamism from the Word of God. It does not aimlessly go from place to place. Always it seeks to hear the Word and obeys. This is why our going out in this mission and ministry of the church, this call can never and should never be separated from worship and prayer. The **tent** should never be divorced from the **altar**. They are part of one another. In our missionary journey, we as a tent community should constantly seek to find our bearings afresh; otherwise we become rootless, swayed to and fro by the winds of change. Our bearings are to be found in Jesus the Christ the crucified Lord and Lord both of the church and world.

Jurgen Moltmann opens his large book on the church with the sentence:

*“This book is intended to help the church find its bearings ..... the fundamental questions have to be answered afresh. Where do you come from? Where are you going? Who are you?”*

If we are to answer those questions; where do you come from? From the hand of the living God who engaged with men and women in a new way through the death and the resurrection of Jesus Christ and the outpouring of His Spirit. Where are you going? To make disciples of all nations; to fulfil the commission with which we have been charged. Who are you? A pilgrim people with whom the same Christ promised that he will be present to the close of the ages.

### **THE WELL**

The well stands for water, the basic necessity of life. It stands for common things in life. You cannot cut off the well from the altar and the tent. God forbid. They belong together. They make up the unique combination of the **holy** on the one hand and the **Common** on the other. And this is what happens in the Holy Communion or the Lord’s Supper that you will be celebrating in your ministry in the years to come. It is the celebration of the union between the holy and common. Very often we take common things in life for granted. They no longer amaze us or place us in perpetual wonder. Take our own family. We can easily take our homes and families for granted. They cease to amaze us. Children are just children. The wife is just a wife. The husband is just a husband. No more than that. Isaac in his continuing exodus was moving from place to place with everything he had – his altar, his tent and his whole household including the animals.

Two things I want to stress here. First, your family. The point has always been made that a **talatala** should always endeavour to be a good and responsible family man. St. Paul stresses the same point to Timothy.

***“The elder (priest, talatala) must be a man who manages his own family well and bring his children up to obey him and be well-behaved. How can any man who does not understand how to manage his own family, have responsibility for the church of God?”***

(1 Timothy 3:4-5, Jerusalem).

The family, this God-given institution is going through difficult time today in Fiji and the world over. Work in the church is going to keep some of you very busy in future. May God grant you strength and grace not to forget your own family.

Second, the general care and upkeep of your own homes. You will be receiving visitors from time to time. Try to set an example to the village or community in terms of cleanliness and general care of your homes. If there is a small piece of land in your backyard, make use of that. It would help greatly and also provide good exercise to your physical body. Take good care of your body. Keep fit all the time.

In the midst of all the basic necessities of our life, we hear these two words of Jesus on the cross: *“I thirst”*. St. John as well as the whole NT tells us that Jesus was a human being like ourselves. He was also thirsty. He shared with us our common life. Whenever and wherever we hear or see unmet basic necessities of life, we hear him crying out: “I thirst.” And as we look to him, he is pointing us to the direction of human needs everywhere, calling us all to spend and be spent in his Name.

Familiar landmarks have disappeared in Fiji at the political, socio-economic and religious levels. When these familiar landmarks of life disappear as you go in your journey, May God, grant you his peace and good sense. To be **strong** and **faithful** at the altar with your God. That you may be wise and **obedient** in your tent-making. And be humble and loving at the well of our common life together. I wish you well. My prayers and best thoughts go with you.

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